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Knowing the Audience, Understanding the Culture, Pursuing the Lord

Aogu Suzuki

It is very awkward when a Chinese person comes up to me and says, “Ni hao!” I am Japanese. I would not be able to communicate with him or her because I am not Chinese, and I do not understand the language either. Knowing the audience is very important for anyone who desires to communicate well, and knowing their language is just a part of it. Jennifer Jegerson, a professor at Biola University, comments on this and says that the communicators need to know the audience and their communicational culture (Jegerson, 259). She talks about the communicational cultures and states that there are “literate cultures” and “oral cultures.” A “literate culture” focuses on communicating primarily through reading and writing, and an “oral culture” focuses on communicating through listening, speaking, and memorizing. Jegerson contrasts those two and says, “Oral people groups are not simply those that lack the skills of literacy, they are understood to have their own complex ways of communicating and storing knowledge that are critical and valuable aspects of their culture” (261). Being able to figure out which culture the audience be help a person to be an effective communicator.

Communicational cultures have influences on every aspect of people’s lives, and one of them is religion. This essay specifically focuses on Christianity in those two cultures, and contrasts how people become Christians, become more devoted Christians, and start telling others about Christ in different ways.

Understanding differences between those two cultures is critical for Christians as they aim to faithfully fulfill the Great Commission, which is in Matthew 28:19-20. In this passage, Jesus says, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in he name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Warren

Wiersbe comments on this verse and says, “The only command in the entire Great Commission is ‘make disciples’” (87). Webster Dictionary defines disciple as “someone who accepts and helps to spread the teachings of a famous person (in this case, Jesus Christ).” So the process of making disciples starts by telling the teaching of Jesus so that people can become Christians. In literate culture, literacy plays a big role regarding conversion. Behind almost all the evangelistic events are counselors, youth leaders, preachers and faithful Christians, who, with worn-out Bibles in their hands, go through the Bible so that non-believers can understand what Jesus has done for them. If they do not have an opportunity to go to one of those events, they can go to the bookstore and buy the Bible or even Google “Who is Jesus?” Grant Lovejoy points out how Western way of evangelism is very centered on literacy and says, “From the time of the Gutenberg Bible, Christianity ‘has walked on literate feet’ and has directly or indirectly required literacy of others” (7). Lovejoy then focuses on oral culture and says that “70% of all people in the world are oral communicators • those who can’t, don’t, or won’t learn through literate means” (7). Research shows that 5.7 billion people are currently oral learners, and 90% of Christian workers are using literate methods to proclaim the Gospel (Lovejoy, 12). As missiologists and missionaries work together to reach every people group with the gospel, “it has become clear that there has been a deficit in overall strategy because of a strong dependancy on literate methods for evangelism and discipleship” (Jagerson, 260). Jagerson says, “It is not sufficient to simply take literate material and read it orally. It requires a fundamental shift away from the use of propositional arguments, linear thinking, and abstract conceptualizations” (262). The message needs to be “presented in a manner that honors oral ways of processing information, the work will likely produce exponentially more successful outcomes, such as a greater capacity for new believers to grasp meaning, and respond to the message of the gospel with saving faith” (262). In oral culture, people become Christians by hearing what Jesus Christ has done for them. Lovejoy says that telling Gospel as a story is a powerful way to evangelize in an oral culture (8).

Communicational cultures certainly affect the way people understand the Gospel, but all Christians believe one same thing that Jesus died for their sins and rose from the dead. And after getting saved, All of them, regardless of communicational background, have one goal: to become more like Jesus Christ. Those who live in literate cultures aim to grow by studying the Word of God, reading books written by men and women of God, doing daily devotionals, keeping journals, and so on. Literacy plays a huge role in the area of growth. Some might even learn Hebrew and Greek in order to gain more knowledge.

Christians in oral communities, on the other hand, grow mainly by hearing the Word of God and listening to the teaching. Lovejoy mentions the power of narrative stories in oral cultures and says, "It was only through a chronological presentation of God's word, Old Testament and on to the Gospels, story by story, that they were able to vividly portray the holy nature and character of God, the sinful condition of man, the grip that Satan has on this world and the redeeming solution to man's predicament found in Jesus Christ" (8). Oral cultures Walter Ong points out the change in the oral cultures. He says, "I style the orality of a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print, 'primary orality'. It is 'primary' by contrast with the 'secondary orality' of present-day high-technology culture, in which a new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television, and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print" (10). There are new technologies that can be utilized for oral Christians. Jagerson says, "A number of scholars, such as James Miles Foley, Tom Pettitt, and Lars Ole Sauerberg, suggest that the phenol of new technologies is going to lead to a revolution that will be on par with the Gutenberg Press" (269). People have been working on capturing the Bible in the media form. When the media content is a full New Testament or full Bible, "it becomes an accurate and complete presentation of biblical truth for the oral learner" (Swarr and Koch, 87). Lovejoy calls this the "oral Bible" and refers to it as a new powerful tool (7). Swarr and Koch say that there is an additional advantage in using an oral Bible. They say, "It becomes an unchangeable and exhaustive source for oral learners to refer back to time and time again" (88).

According to Jegerson, "secondary oral" learners exist in literate cultures, too (269). Lovejoy and Claydon say that secondary

oral learners include those “who have the ability to read and write, but they prefer to learn or process information by oral, rather than written, means, aided by electronic audio and visual communications” (63–64). W. Jay Moon says, “53.5 % of seminary students preferred oral learning compared to print learning” (55). Linda Labbo says that “students who sometimes struggle with school literacy are able to engage in highly complex electronic communications” (8).

In his book “Winning Story Wars,” Jonah Sachs called these secondary oral learners “digital learners.” He says, “The oral tradition that dominated human experience for all but the last few hundred years is returning with a vengeance. It’s a monumental, epoch-making, totally unforeseen turn of events . . . our new digital culture of information sharing has so rejected the broadcast style and embraced key elements of oral traditions, that we might meaningfully call whatever’s coming next the digital era” (20). Jagerson says, “Perhaps the oral strategies such as the use of narrative for evangelism and discipleship on the mission field are particularly well sited to help support and recalibrate the efforts of Christian education in the West” (273).

Literate cultures and oral cultures differ in their ways to reach the same goal to be like Christ, but Jagerson, Lovejoy, Claydon and Ong all point out that those two cultures can make positive impact on each other in order to more effectively seek Jesus Christ.

Communicational cultures have huge influence on the style that people use to pursue the goal of becoming like Christ. Jergerson says that literate learners “tend to be more individualistic in how they understand personal time and space and in their learning patterns” (Jagerson, 261). People living in literate cultures prefer topical studies, verse by verse expositions, and personal time with God (Jegerson, 261). For oral communicators, on the other hand, “Knowledge and communication tends to be directly relational between people and about people in the context of real life circumstances rather than about linear concepts that have been abstracted from relationships and circumstances. Oral learners tend to make decisions as a group and interpret what matters as an individual in terms of what it means for their role in the group” (Jagerson, 261). Lovejoy explains why it is important to use tools that is focused on the community or the audience, focusing on evangelism and multiplication. He

says, “Oral strategies provide multiple ways for effectively engaging a people group to readily involve oral communicators in efforts to reach their own people group and others with the gospel. Storying is one reproducible evangelistic and church-planting approach – new believers can readily share the gospel, plant new churches and disciple new believers in the same way that they themselves were reached and disciplined.”

There are differences in methods, but every single Christian who lived in the past, living now, and will live, have one desire that God will be glorified. When the history of human being started, human race only had oral culture. Literate culture started slowly coming in, and Gutenberg radically changed the way people here the Gospel, and the way Christians pursue Jesus. Now, because of the new technologies, two cultures are getting blended.

Lovejoy leaves a challenge for churches and Christians and says organizations are to “ride the next wave of Kingdom advancement by developing and implementing methods for effective oral strategies. Partners, networks, seminaries, mission agencies, conference and workshop leaders, as well as other Christian influencers are called upon to recognize the issues of orality in the world around them. We all need to become intentional in making disciples of oral learners. We need to raise awareness, initiate oral communication projects and train missionaries and local leaders in chronological Bible storying as an effective church-planting strategy.”

Thus, it is important for Christians to not only focus on literacy, but also to focus on orality. Christians are to utilize both of them wisely, and effectively reach out, disciple, and expand the Kingdom of God for the glory of God.

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